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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GEORGETOWN 000121

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TAGS: SENV AEMR EAID PGOV GY

SUBJECT: GUYANA FLOOD UPDATE: WATER LEVEL STABLE

REF: (A) GEORGETOWN 70, (B) GEORGETOWN 59,

(C) GEORGETOWN 58, (D) GEORGETOWN 53,
(E) GEORGETOWN 45, (F) GEORGETOWN 41

¶11. SUMMARY: Several days of relatively good weather have allowed water levels in affected areas to lower slightly. The GOG declared two of the affected regions disaster areas and briefed donors of the potential need for assistance in mitigation and disaster prevention. Meanwhile, reports of vandalism of the water management system have pitted farmers against cattle ranchers in flood relief efforts. END SUMMARY.

A Wet January

¶12. The water level in the East Demerara Water Conservancy (EDWC) remains elevated but falling following heavy rainfall beginning in late December and continuing through January. Rainfall in Georgetown for the month of January totaled 22 inches, three times the historical average. The Government of Guyana declared Guyana's Administrative Region 5, Mahaica/Berbice, a disaster area as well as the Pomeroon River catchment area in Administrative Region 2, Pomeroon/Supenaam on Saturday, January 28, briefing the donor community of the potential need for financing for disaster prevention and mitigation, including rehabilitation of livelihoods and drainage infrastructure. A team from United Nations Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is expected in Guyana shortly to conduct an assessment of the flood situation in the disaster areas.

¶13. An officer from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance visited the Mahaica River area on January 29 and reported no apparent demand for large scale humanitarian assistance. Many residents of the affected areas are reportedly holding fast in their homes. The UN estimates that around 3,500 families are affected by the floods, and 400 individuals are currently being housed in shelters operated by the Civil Defence Commission.

¶14. Reports of vandalism of the drainage system have surfaced at several points along the East Coast. Officials speculate that cattle farmers, whose stock graze on land between the Conservancy and the Crown Dam that divides the grazing area from lands used for rice farming, have disabled the kokers and cut holes in the crown dam so as to drain the grazing land. This saves cattle, but floods villages. The GOG has dispatched joint police-military patrols to monitor the situation and offered a GD 1 million award (USD 4,975) for information leading to the arrest of vandals.

¶15. EDWC management has placed 20,000 sandbags along a section of the dam identified as vulnerable to overtopping. A heretofore unused outlet to the Atlantic has also started to drain water out of the conservancy.

A Call for Reliable Information

¶16. There is concern about conflicting reports of water levels in the EDWC. The EDWC Water Level Management Manual developed in the aftermath of the January floods calls states that the water level as measured at the Lama sluice should not exceed 58.5 GD during rainy season. The EDWC board should aim to have water level at the Full Supply Level of 57.5 GD at the end of the rainy season. The water level also serves as a tripwire at various stages of post's disaster preparedness scenarios. Consul is in regular contact with EDWC staff, who measure and report the EDWC water levels. The measurements he reports are often different from those reported by the Guyana Information Agency. Major General (ret.) Joe Singh, a key figure in the Guyana Concerned Citizen's Initiative for Flood Relief NGO founded in response to the January 2005 floods, told the Ambassador that he believes the GOG deliberately underreports water levels in the EDWC to avoid causing panic. Comment: the difference may also be due to the fact that water levels vary over time and the levels reported by GINA are normally several hours old by the time they hit the

wires.

17. Col. John Lewis, a member of the Strategic Emergency Engineering Committee charged with drafting an engineering response to last year's floods, believes that the manager of the EDWC may actually exaggerate the water level in the EDWC to elevate his own status. What is clear is that water management officials have not held fast to the tripwires in the EDWC management plan, as the water level has occasionally briefly risen above the 58.5 GD limit at Lama prescribed in the plan.

Estimated Impacts

18. The flooding has sparked media discussion of food security in light of the loss of land under cultivation. The price of some produce at local markets has doubled, as the many of flooded areas are prime agricultural locations. The floods have elevated food prices as well. The price of food as measured in the Urban Georgetown Consumer Price Index rose 7.8% year on year at the end of December 2005. The current round of flooding has raised prices for several produce. Potatoes, which sold for GD55/pound (USD 0.27) in September 2005 were selling for GD90/pound (USD 0.45) in late January, an increase of 64%. The price of eddoes, a common substitute, has risen one-third, from GD45/pound to GD60/pound. Reports on the impact on rice production are mixed, with the Guyana Rice Producers Organization saying 28,000 acres have been inundated while the Guyana Rice Development Board places the figure at 12,000 acres. General Singh estimates that 60,000 cattle risk dying. The Guyana Sugar Corporation (Guysuco) has estimated a potential loss of USD 6 million as a result of a delay in the beginning of the grinding season due to the weather.

19. The GOG has been distributing cash crop farmers in Region 5 an assistance package of GD100,000 (USD 498) each. The GOG stepped back from plan to distribute an additional 5,000 flood relief checks by the first week of February after being overwhelmed by requests. President Jagdeo issued a statement urging flood affected people to apply for only one check per household.

10. An assessment of the leptospirosis situation is being reported septel.

BULLEN